FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT
November 4, 2001

THE TOUGHEST COMMANDMENT
John M. Buchanan

O loving God,
To turn away from you is to fall,
To turn toward you is to rise,
and to stand before you is to abide forever.
Grant us, dear God,
in all our duties you help;
in all our uncertainties your guidance;
in all our dangers your protection;
and in all our sorrows your peace;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Augustine of Hippo (354-430)

FOURTH
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A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Ephesians 4:1-6
Luke 6:27-31

Startle us, O God, with your truth, and open our hearts and minds to your word, that hearing we might believe and trust you with our lives and submit our wills to your will; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Someone has observed that Jesus issued two moral mandates that his adherents and followers down through the centuries have found so problematic that they have been rather thoroughly ignored. The first is his insistence that it is the responsibility of wealthy people to take care of poor people by, among other things, redistributing their wealth. And the second is that we all must love our enemies. It has never been easy to do that. It is not easy to do it, particularly in times like these.

My earliest encounter with the rigor of Jesus' command to "love your enemy" came during the first year of my ministry, at this time of year. It was the early sixties. The Korean War had ended less than a decade earlier. Our nation was deeply committed to a Cold War with the Soviet Union. Cuba had become part of the Soviet Bloc, and we nearly went to war over Soviet Inter-Continental Ballistic Missiles in Cuba, aimed at Washington and New York City. In the towns and cities of America, a new program called "Trick or Treat for UNICEF" was in its early days, and no one had ever tried it in the community where I was the new Presbyterian minister. I thought it was a splendid idea. I recruited the Sunday school superintendent and a few junior highs, and we mapped our strategy to have our youngsters dress up for Halloween and instead of begging for candy, knock on doors and say, "Trick or Treat for UNICEF!" and ask for money for the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund. Each child had a little orange and black UNICEF coin container and a stack of pamphlets explaining what UNICEF was. The money collected would feed, clothe, shelter, and educate the world's needy children. Seemed like a good idea, a Christian idea. I did not yet understand how unpopular and difficult it is to love your enemy—even the child of your enemy.

A leader in the congregation, an active, generous man, with a wonderful family, called me and said he wanted to see me. It was about the UNICEF thing, he said. When we met in a day or so, he let me have it. Didn't I know that UNICEF helped communist countries, our enemies, the Cubans, and the Czechoslovakians, the Yugoslavians, even the Soviets? Didn't I know those countries couldn't feed their own children because they were using all their money preparing to destroy us—which Soviet leaders used to threaten to do in those days? Didn't I know they were our enemies—who had promised to destroy us—and that the only way to deal with that kind of enemy was something we had learned in 1941 the hard way, was to destroy him first? Didn't I

know that helping them feed their hungry children was aiding and abetting the enemy; that our dear innocent children, dressed up as ghosts and circus clowns and princesses, were virtually communist pawns, agents of the Soviet Union?

He was already pretty unhappy with me, and this was the last straw. If I persisted with this UNICEF business, he was going to quit and take his family to another church. In a congregation of eighty-five souls, the loss of a solid family is a major event, not particularly good for the new minister. He also represented about 10 percent of the church's budget, which further complicated the matter. So I tried scripture. "Jesus told us to love our enemies," I pointed out. It didn't work. "I love them alright," he said. "I'm just not going to help them. My kids aren't either." They didn't. We participated in UNICEF. He and his family joined another church. And I learned that the mandate to "love your enemies" is not a simple matter.

It is not a popular text.

> Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. . . . If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love these who love them. . . . But love your enemies, your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High.

Let me assure you that the preacher, particularly this preacher, feels the weight and pressure of that every bit as much as the listener. Retaliation for wrongs done to us seems to come almost naturally. Answering hate with hate, responding to violence perpetrated by an enemy with our own violence seems to be written into our DNA and is simply the way we are, from the playground to the battlefield. When NFL linebacker Bryan Cox was seriously injured two weeks ago by what he considered to be an illegal block, he announced defiantly to the press, several times, that if it took him all his life, he would "get" the perpetrator, "take him down," he said. It's a theme of Hollywood movies, getting the violent enemy who did something terrible to the hero, evening the scales of justice. And, of course, it is written into the judicial code of most ancient world religions. "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth" the Code of Hammurabi teaches, twenty centuries before Christ, a mandate reflected in our own Hebrew tradition.

Reciprocity is the basis of our judicial and penal systems. Punishments, in theory, are supposed to correspond to, or be the moral equivalent of, the harm done. It is the theory behind capital punishment. A life taken can only be justly answered by taking the perpetrator's life. Proponents of capital punishment attempt to argue that what really is at stake is crime deterrence, even though there is absolutely no evidence to back that up. Something like 70 percent of the American people favor capital punishment because it makes us feel good, apparently. And if it continues the cycle of violence—this sponsored by all of us, not to mention the propensity to make mistakes fairly regularly, executing innocent people—so be it. Our need for vengeance—described as justice—runs deep in us.

Frederick Nietzsche said love for enemies was an ethic for cowards, deserving of contempt, not respect.

Sociologists and anthropologists observe that many societies define themselves in terms of the other, the enemy everybody hates, and that once the enemy is vanquished, the society either has to find a new one or suffer an identity crisis.

So perhaps it was one of Jesus' most courageous moments when he said, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you." And perhaps it is not only the most difficult mandate, but also the most realistic and authentic and true. Perhaps, given the historic reality that every war to end all wars is simply the prolegomenon to the next war, and given the reality that our penal system seems to succeed best at training and motivating prisoners to become more efficient and more violent criminals when they get out, and given the personal reality which we have all experienced—that hatred breeds hatred, or as someone succinctly put it, "'an eye for an eye' merely leaves two people blind"—given all that, perhaps Jesus is the final realist and instead of ignoring or blowing off his moral teaching as too weak, too vulnerable, perhaps we should be taking it seriously and entertaining the notion, at least, that love for enemies may be a very practical strategy.

It is easy to hate at a time such as this. Grievous harm has been done to us. Innocent people have been killed; innocent people continue to be victims of bio-terrorism. And to make matters worse, the murderers who hijacked the planes, flew them into the World Trade Center, and those who organized, trained, inspired, and supported them, and those who continue to lionize them as righteous martyrs, claim that it was done in the name of their religion: a holy war, a jihad against infidels, they continue to call it. And it is easy to hate that, and to hate them, and hate everybody who looks like them, and hate everybody who talks like them, to hate Islam and its adherents, and to hate Afghans and their friends. And if that is what we do, Osama bin Laden will have won a very great victory.

New York Times correspondent, Andrew Sullivan, wrote a thoughtful and helpful piece in the *Sunday Magazine,* "This Is a Religious War," in which he argues that it is foolish to ignore the fact that the terrorist grow out of a radical, fundamentalist form of Islam and that this is surely a religious war—not of Islam vs. Christianity and Judaism, however, but a war of fundamentalism against faith of all kinds that are at peace with freedom and modernity. This war has echoes in American religion, Sullivan points out, which has its own form of fundamentalism and radical violence. A similar editorial in the *Economist* urged Americans to continue to understand that this is not a war against Islam and to keep saying that, but also not to deny the terrible propensity of fundamentalist religion to turn hateful (30 October 2001). Our own record is not so good. Before the Middle Ages, after all, Christian nations were far more cruel and violent than the Muslim world. The Crusades were not at all the romantic, heroic attempt of Christians to rescue the Holy Land, but an all-out war on Islam, a holy war, a Christian jihad that produced infidel blood in the street of Jerusalem, deep enough to cover the horses' ankles.

The Koran teaches mercy and forgiveness and justice and tolerance. But there are also passages in the Koran that urge the faithful to kill those perceived as a threat to Islam. "Kill those who join other gods wherever you find them. . . . Wage war against such infidels as are your neighbors" (see Sullivan, *New York Times,* 7 October 2001).

But the same can be said about the Bible. Israel's ancient law commanded love for neighbor, defined neighbor pretty narrowly, and often urged hatred and violence toward the non-neighbor:

> Psalm 29: "Evildoers are doomed for destruction."
>
> Psalm 94: "He will repay them for their iniquity and wipe them out for their wickedness; the Lord our God will wipe them out."
>
> Psalm 139 (one of the loveliest in the Bible, a favorite): "You have searched me and known me. . . .Where shall I flee from your spirit. . ." also says, "O that you would kill the wicked, I hate them with a perfect hatred."

Did you choke on the words we read together in Psalm 149: "Let the high praises of God be on their throats and two-edged swords in their hands to execute vengeance on the nations"?

It is important not to blame Islam for terrorism, and it is important to acknowledge that millions of Muslims live comfortably in the Western world and that Muslim leaders have abhorred the violence of September 11. It is also important to start to learn as much as we can about Islam, Islamic history and culture. And it is important to acknowledge, difficult as it is, we are complicit in our creating conditions that fan the flames of radical fundamentalism and its resulting violence. Muslims resent our troops stationed in Saudi Arabia. Muslims resent our support of Iraq when it was at war against Iran and now our continuing embargo against Iraq, our unquestioning support of the Taliban so long as they fought against the Soviets and now our bombing. Muslims resent and radical fundamentalists exploit our wrongful bombing of a Sudanese pharmaceutical factory that turned out not to have anything to do with chemical weapons, our obvious partiality to Israel over the Palestinians even as Israeli tanks batter and destroy Palestinian homes and businesses in Bethlehem, our rude refusal of a Saudi gift to aid the September 11 victims and now our bombing of Afghanistan, causing inevitable suffering and death for an already devastated and oppressed people.

I do not propose ignoring what happened to us. I deeply believe that we must do what we have to do to bring to justice those who did this and those who helped them. I do not, personally, oppose—in fact, I support—our military initiative, but alone it will not accomplish our goals. It is important that we understand why we are hated and begin the hard and demanding work necessary to changing how we act in the Muslim world. The *Economist* editorialized that "Muslims who think the West must be fought and defeated are not going to be bombed into changing their minds—but we could be bombed into changing our minds, that is into agreeing with Mr. bin Laden that this is a war of civilizations that must be fought and won. What a horrifying thought."

"Wars always begin in the mind," William Sloane Coffin wrote. "You have to first think others to death. You cannot kill a brother. You cannot kill a sister, a friend, a fellow human being. Wars begin in the heart when fear displaces love" (*Courage to Love,* p. 75).

Jesus asks us to love our enemies and ethicists have always observed the paradox in that, because when you love your enemy, he or she ceases to be an enemy. In his second Inaugural, as the

Civil War was ending, Lincoln said, "With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle."

How could he talk like that about people who hated him so deeply, a woman asked him? Lincoln responded, "Do I not destroy my enemies when I make them my friends?"

The commandment is not to feel love, but to show love—and the promise is not that it will always transform your enemy into a nice person. That seems not to have been the point. When you love your enemy, you change, Jesus said. You become more the human being God created you to be. You become, in fact, a child of God and a maker of the peace of God.

Kenneth Angell, the Roman Catholic Bishop of Vermont, lost his brother and sister-in-law on American Airlines Flight 11. Bishop Angell stood up in his pulpit and told his parishioners that he must forgive the hijackers. He said that it was not going to be easy, nor was he minimizing or softening the brutality of the hijacker's crime. He said that it is precisely what cannot be condoned that must be forgiven and that anything else—hatred, retaliation, revenge—was simply not the way of Jesus.

That is it, basically, for those of us who would follow him.

President Dwight Eisenhower, in words that sound surprisingly immediate, once said, "Down the long lane of history yet to be written, America knows that this world of ours, growing ever smaller, must avoid becoming a community of dreadful fear and hate, and must, instead, be a proud confederation of mutual trust and respect" (See Joanne Adams, 23 September 2001. Trinity Presbyterian Church, Atlanta).

We find ourselves living in a difficult time, a time quite unlike any we have lived in before. And we, you and I, and all of us, must decide how we will live—in fear and hate or in trust and respect.

And as we proceed, day by day, to decide how we shall live, I commend to you again these challenging but truthful words of Jesus:

> Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those that curse you, pray for those who abuse you.

And you will be children of the Most High.

Amen.

Prayers of the People
By Carol J. Allen, Associate Pastor for Congregational Care

God, you come among us in many guises. Today, as we come to you in prayer, we address you as "Vulnerable love giver, Christ, wounded healer, Holy Spirit, compassionate friend" [Kate McIlhagga]. By your providence, all life comes from you and to you all life returns. We give you grateful thanks. Draw us back to yourself and turn us again to your ways. In Jesus of Nazareth we have seen "the love that dares to speak out, the love that listens, the love found most powerfully in weakness, the love that heals, the love we need and long for, O God. . . . Love that is there when sweetness has gone, love that endures beyond the barriers of pain [and of the grave]" [McIlhagga]. God, "you who love those whom we do not love, you who read the hearts of others whom we do not understand, you who know the inward suffering of those whom we ignore, you who discern the efforts of each one in attitudes that we perceive as deceitful, open our eyes and our hearts. You who know each one of us far better than we know ourselves, who love us better than we love ourselves, teach us how to love with your love [influenced by Genevieve Graves]. We pray to know your love in all its fullness.

"Where we have been so full of our own importance that we did not do the one needed thing, where we have worshiped the idols of perfection and failed to see your glory in the vulnerable, attaching more worth to the seen than the unseen, and where we have failed to make connections between politics and health, economics and healing" [McIlhagga], God have mercy upon us.

Have mercy on those men and women who influence the life of this nation—those who frame and administer our laws, the president, courts, and congress; governors, mayors, and city governments; "those who mold public opinion through the press, radio, and television, and those who write what many read. May all be influenced for what is good, not evil; for what is true, not false" [Frank Colquhoun]. Give wisdom, O God, to the leaders of all the nations, a sense of justice to those who wield power, that they may do what is life giving, "so that the poor and weak may breathe freely" [Jim Cotter].

Strengthen this congregation in its work and worship, O God, that we may give graciously to places of human need, speak your praise, and conform to the image of your Son. Fill us with vision and vigor, with hope and healing energy, with commitment and caring action that we may challenge what needs changing and feel the possibility of transformation in our attitudes and our actions.

Look with compassion on all who suffer, those with incurable and stigmatized diseases, those denied dignity, those who live without hope, those who are homeless or abandoned. Make the sick whole, give hope to the dying, comfort those who mourn, uphold all who suffer in body or mind, not only those we know and love but also those known only to you. Stand with those whose world has been turned upside down by acts of violence. Be with all care givers, relief workers, and peace makers. Keep them steady, keep them strong, encourage each one and hold out your hope as their guide to going on. In all things for which we pray, give us the will to bring them about, for the sake of Jesus Christ, who taught his disciples to say when they pray Our Father . . .